



Digital Archives and Indigenous Silence: Reimagining the Jarawa through Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave*

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Abstract— This paper explores the intersection of indigenous representation, ecological ethics, and digital preservation through a close reading of Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave: An Island Novel* (2014). Set in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the novel subtly engages with the lives of the Jarawa tribe, an indigenous community historically marginalized in state archives and media narratives. Rather than fictionalizing the Jarawa's voice, Sekhsaria foregrounds their presence through silence, gesture, and ecological attunement, modeling a form of ethical narrative restraint. This literary silence mirrors a broader archival erasure, where indigenous voices are excluded or distorted by colonial and postcolonial documentation systems. Drawing on theories from Digital Humanities, postcolonial thought, and critical archival studies, the paper argues that Digital Humanities can offer transformative tools to counteract these silences, if they are applied with decolonial ethics. It proposes the idea of a decolonial digital archive that centers indigenous agency, respects orality and refusal, and resists extractive knowledge practices. The paper suggests that annotated editions of *The Last Wave*, combined with GIS-based cultural mapping and audio/visual platforms, could serve as ethical gateways to indigenous knowledge, without appropriating or essentializing it.



Keywords— Digital Humanities, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonial Archives, Jarawa Tribe, Ecocriticism

INTRODUCTION

Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave: An Island Novel* (2014) stands as a distinctive literary work that bridges journalism, activism, and fiction to confront pressing questions of ecological vulnerability and indigenous survival in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Set against the backdrop of the lush, forested landscapes of South and Middle Andaman, the novel offers a compelling narrative that interweaves personal transformation with collective histories of loss, resistance, and ecological imbalance. Through the eyes of Harish, a disillusioned mainlander who seeks refuge on the islands following a personal crisis, readers are gradually introduced to the delicate socio-ecological dynamics that define the region. More than a story of individual redemption, this novel serves as a narrative intervention, inviting readers to confront the environmental consequences of unchecked

development and the ethical dilemmas surrounding indigenous autonomy.

At the heart of this narrative lies the presence of the Jarawa tribe, one of the last surviving indigenous communities in India, which has maintained a largely non-assimilated existence. The Jarawa inhabit the dense tropical forests of the Andaman Islands and have historically resisted sustained contact with outsiders. However, in recent decades, their relative isolation has come under increasing threat from multiple forces, most notably the expansion of the Andaman Trunk Road (ATR), escalating tourism, illegal logging, and state-driven development agendas that prioritize infrastructure over ecological integrity. As Sekhsaria himself has documented extensively in his journalistic and academic writings, the Jarawa's forest homeland has become a contested site where the rhetoric of modernization collides with the lived realities of indigenous knowledge and ecological stewardship.

The novel draws attention to this conflict not through sensationalism but through subtle observation and ethical storytelling. The Jarawa are not given direct speech in the novel, a narrative decision that mirrors their real-world silence in official records and media portrayals. Yet, their presence is powerfully felt, as moral anchors, as ecological stewards, and as silent witnesses to the damage wrought by modernity. This novel does not romanticize indigenous life, nor does it claim to speak on behalf of the Jarawa. Instead, it critiques the structural forces, bureaucratic, economic, and ideological, that seek to control and redefine their existence. The novel thus becomes an important literary voice in the broader discourse of postcolonial ecocriticism, illustrating how fiction can reveal the layered complexities of indigenous representation, environmental degradation, and the politics of archiving endangered cultures.

In this context, the question of how we record, preserve, and represent communities like the Jarawa becomes urgent. Traditional state and colonial archives have long framed such tribes as “vanishing,” “primitive,” or “mute,” denying them agency in shaping their narratives. Sekhsaria's novel resists these tropes by creating space for ethical reflection and alternative storytelling. This opens a productive space for Digital Humanities, where digital archives, if designed with decolonial sensitivity, can offer new ways of preserving indigenous knowledge and challenging the silences embedded in official histories.

The present paper examines how Digital Humanities, particularly through the tools and ethics of digital archiving, can offer a pathway to address such silences. By taking *The Last Wave* as a literary case study, the paper explores how DH methodologies can be employed not only to preserve endangered indigenous knowledge systems, like those of the Jarawa, but also to critique and counteract the historical distortions embedded in colonial, state, and media narratives. The central argument is that a decolonial digital archive, built with attention to consent, participation, and indigenous epistemologies, can serve as a corrective to centuries of misrepresentation and erasure. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper seeks to reimagine the role of digital technologies not as neutral tools, but as transformative platforms capable of unsettling dominant histories and amplifying marginalized voices with ethical responsibility.

This paper is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together concepts from Digital Humanities (DH), postcolonial theory, oral tradition studies, and critical archival studies. These perspectives offer tools to interrogate both the literary representation of the Jarawa in this novel and the broader structural silences that have defined indigenous presence in archival and media

discourses. The Digital Humanities, broadly defined, refer to the application of computational methods to the study of humanities subjects, but more critically, DH also encompasses the ethics and politics of knowledge production and dissemination in digital spaces. As Roopika Risam argues in *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (2018), DH must be examined not merely as a technological project, but as a site of “epistemological and infrastructural intervention” (Risam 4). In the context of this paper, DH is approached through the lens of digital archiving, which involves not only the digitization of textual and cultural materials but also decisions about metadata, access, community participation, and representational ethics.

This project also draws from postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” examines how the voices of marginalized and colonized subjects are often erased or distorted when filtered through dominant discourses. Spivak asserts that “representation” in both the political and epistemic sense often fails the subaltern, who remains unheard even when present within texts or institutions (Spivak 104). This concern is highly relevant in the case of the Jarawa, who are present throughout this novel as central figures in the moral and ecological conflict, yet remain voiceless in direct dialogue. The novel, in its ethical restraint, mirrors a larger structural problem: even well-meaning representations can perpetuate silence if they do not provide avenues for self-representation or recognize the forms in which indigenous expression occurs.

Critical archival studies provide a crucial ethical framework for understanding how archives, digital or otherwise, are never neutral repositories of truth but are instead shaped by power, inclusion, exclusion, and narrative control. Michelle Caswell, a leading voice in this field, argues in *The Right to Be Forgotten in Archives* (2018) that traditional archival systems have historically served the interests of dominant institutions and have often excluded marginalized communities from shaping how their histories are preserved and accessed. In response, Caswell advocates for community-centered, participatory archives that enable historically silenced groups to regain narrative authority over their pasts. Such a model is vital when considering how to preserve Jarawa cultural memory in digital form: rather than treating their knowledge as artifacts to be collected, a decolonial digital archive would seek to collaborate with communities, respect protocols of consent and privacy, and prioritize indigenous modes of categorization, storytelling, and epistemic sovereignty.

Sekhsaria makes a deliberate and ethically charged narrative decision, the Jarawa tribe, though central to the

novel's moral and ecological compass, is never given direct speech. This narrative restraint is not a failure of representation, but rather a conscious rejection of ventriloquism, an act that refuses to impose an external voice onto a community that has long been spoken for by colonial ethnographers, state agencies, and media outlets. Instead of attempting to fictionalize or approximate the speech of the Jarawa, Sekhsaria chooses to let their presence speak through action, gesture, and silence. This approach mirrors the author's real-life engagement with indigenous rights and environmental activism, where respectful distance often takes precedence over narrative control. In doing so, the novel avoids the trap of appropriating indigenous subjectivity for narrative authenticity and instead models a form of ethical literary witnessing.

The Jarawa emerge in the novel not as passive figures or exoticized "others," but as embodied repositories of ecological wisdom. Their knowledge of the forest, conveyed through actions rather than words, stands in stark contrast to the external gaze of journalists, tourists, and bureaucrats who seek to define or regulate them. As Seema, one of the novel's central characters, observes, "They live in a way that we've forgotten, close to the land, listening to it, moving with it" (Sekhsaria 123). Their silence, then, is not emptiness but presence; it is a mode of resistance and self-preservation in a world that constantly seeks to violate their autonomy. This is most powerfully illustrated in the aftermath of the tsunami. While government officials and mainland settlers are caught off guard by the disaster, the Jarawa read the signs in nature and retreat inland to safety. Harish, the protagonist, reflects on this moment with reverence, "They knew. Without forecasts or satellite images, they knew. The forest had told them, and they listened" (Sekhsaria 205). Here, the novel privileges observational and oral epistemologies that remain outside the purview of technocratic knowledge systems, suggesting that wisdom is not always textual, and survival is not always documented.

This literary portrayal echoes the systemic silence of the Jarawa in official records and public discourse. Historically, indigenous communities like the Jarawa have been subject to what Gayatri Spivak identifies as the structural silencing of the subaltern, where presence in the archive does not equate to agency or voice. This novel does not attempt to resolve this silence, but rather renders it visible, inviting readers to reflect on the violence of representation itself. The narrative form thus becomes a mirror to archival practices, where absence is not merely a gap but a product of exclusionary systems of knowledge production. While literature has more creative freedom than state archives, Sekhsaria's refusal to fictionalize Jarawa speech gestures toward a shared ethical problem, how do we

document those who resist documentation? And more importantly, how can we avoid turning that resistance into another form of narrative appropriation? In this way, this novel operates on two registers. It is, first, a work of ecological fiction that foregrounds indigenous resilience and environmental ethics. But it is also a meta-commentary on the politics of representation, dramatizing the very difficulty of writing about communities that exist outside dominant systems of language, legality, and technology. The silence of the Jarawa in the novel thus becomes a site of ethical engagement rather than narrative failure, prompting readers and scholars to rethink the protocols of voice, visibility, and authority. As such, the novel opens critical space for a Digital Humanities intervention that seeks not to "give voice" to the Jarawa, but to create platforms where their epistemologies can be preserved and honored without translation or appropriation.

Postcolonial state archives in India, while ostensibly committed to tribal welfare, have often inherited and reproduced these colonial epistemologies. Policies governing the Jarawa, especially those surrounding the controversial Andaman Trunk Road (ATR), reflect a paternalistic logic in which the state claims to know what is best for the indigenous population. The language of such documents is frequently couched in developmentalist rhetoric that masks underlying coercive intentions: assimilation, surveillance, and spatial control. The absence of Jarawa voices in these records is conspicuous; even where the tribe is the subject of policy decisions, their perspectives, desires, or knowledge systems are nowhere acknowledged. This structural silencing mirrors the concerns raised by critical archival theorists like Michelle Caswell, who argue that traditional archives often reinforce existing power hierarchies by privileging institutional voices and marginalizing or erasing community-based knowledge.

Pankaj Sekhsaria has critiqued these dynamics extensively in his journalism and academic work. In essays published in *Economic and Political Weekly* and *The Hindu*, as well as in his nonfiction collection *Islands in Flux: The Andaman and Nicobar Story*, he details how both media and official institutions have contributed to the construction of the Jarawa as a spectacle, a population to be observed, regulated, and ultimately folded into the national mainstream. For example, in an article in *The Hindu* newspaper titled "Jarawa in the Cultural Ghetto," Sekhsaria highlights how government interventions often treat the tribe as "biological entities to be protected and monitored" rather than as communities with political agency and cultural subjectivity (Sekhsaria 6). He further criticizes the media's tendency to sensationalize contact with the Jarawa, reducing complex cultural interactions to headlines about

“naked tribes” or “stone-age people,” thus reinforcing the same tropes that colonial ethnographers employed over a century ago. Even academic research, often well-meaning, is not immune to these pitfalls. Sekhsaria warns against the “over-archiving” of indigenous lives through frameworks that prioritize data collection over dialogue and preservation over participation. The proliferation of reports, census records, and ecological studies rarely results in material benefits or political empowerment for the Jarawa themselves. Instead, they become archived subjects, defined by external observers, constrained by categories they had no role in shaping, and preserved in formats that exclude their epistemologies.

What emerges from this analysis is a deeply entrenched asymmetry in the politics of documentation. The Jarawa are among the most studied yet least heard communities in India, a paradox that speaks to the ethical crisis at the heart of indigenous archiving. The absence of indigenous agency in traditional archives is not a neutral omission but a constitutive feature of systems designed to manage and contain rather than understand or collaborate. This makes the case for a radical rethinking of archival practice, one that is participatory, decolonial, and attuned to orality and relationality. In this light, this novel, with its careful refusal to over-narrate or appropriate Jarawa voice, serves as a useful model for what ethical engagement might look like, not just in fiction, but in the broader sphere of digital preservation and cultural memory.

In response to the epistemic erasure and representational imbalance surrounding indigenous communities like the Jarawa, this section outlines a framework for building a decolonial digital archive grounded in the principles of ethical Digital Humanities (DH). Unlike conventional archives that operate from top-down, institution-driven perspectives, a decolonial DH archive would prioritize collaboration, consent, and indigenous agency, reimagining the very foundations of how knowledge is preserved and circulated. At its core, such an archive must begin by recognizing that the knowledge systems of the Jarawa are not easily reducible to text or static representation. Their epistemologies are oral, embodied, and relational, rooted in their dynamic interactions with the forest, the sea, and each other. This necessitates a rethinking of the archive not as a repository, but as a living, co-created space that respects these forms of knowing.

A decolonial digital archive centered on the Jarawa must begin with the principle of community consent and participation. Unlike traditional, extractive models of knowledge collection, such an archive would be co-created with the Jarawa, if and only if they choose to engage. In cases where direct collaboration is not feasible, the archive

must respect the community's right to refuse inclusion, allowing absence itself to signal resistance to representation. It should also be designed to honor oral, embodied, and ecological forms of knowledge, utilizing formats such as audio recordings, video storytelling, and forest-based narratives in indigenous languages. These approaches challenge Western biases that prioritize text, offering instead platforms that preserve indigenous epistemologies on their terms.

Digital tools such as GIS-based cultural mapping could further support this effort by representing the Andaman Islands as layered with indigenous histories, rather than as tourist sites or spaces of state control. Alongside this, the archive might include annotated editions of literary works, such as *The Last Wave* or *The Hungry Tide*, enriched with indigenous perspectives and critical commentary. To avoid replicating colonial systems of classification, the project would need to develop community-specific metadata vocabularies, possibly in local languages, and resist rigid taxonomies like “folklore” or “tribal art.” As Roopika Risam and Michelle Caswell have argued, archival justice begins with structural redesign. Modeled on the ethical restraint Sekhsaria practices in his novel, such a digital archive would not claim to speak for indigenous communities, but instead build technologies of listening, refusal, and relational care, offering a more just and respectful approach to digital preservation.

While the vision of a decolonial digital archive is powerful, its realization presents serious ethical challenges, especially when applied to communities like the Jarawa, who have historically resisted outside contact. The most pressing dilemma is how to ensure non-extractive digitization without sustained, voluntary engagement. Documenting their knowledge without their consent, however well-intended, risks repeating colonial patterns of appropriation and undermining the community's autonomy. As Michelle Caswell emphasizes, the right to refuse inclusion must be central to any ethical archival practice. For a group like the Jarawa, silence and absence are not voids to be filled, but expressions of self-determination that a responsible digital project must respect. Equally urgent is the threat of digital colonialism, the reproduction of unequal power dynamics through technology. Archives controlled by external institutions may unintentionally serve academic or institutional interests while excluding indigenous voices. To counter this, a decolonial archive must be co-designed with community stakeholders, incorporate dynamic consent mechanisms, and be transparent about its limitations. If direct collaboration is not possible, the archive must acknowledge what it cannot ethically include. In this way, the project becomes not a comprehensive database, but a

space of ethical negotiation and humility, reflecting the same restraint and reverence that Sekhsaria exemplifies in *The Last Wave*.

Building on these challenges, literature, particularly a novel like *The Last Wave*, offers an alternative framework for ethical engagement with indigenous presence in the digital age. While empirical and archival records often strive for completeness or authority, fiction can model forms of respectful incompleteness, emphasizing the value of listening, withholding, and acknowledging epistemic boundaries. Sekhsaria's refusal to speak on behalf of the Jarawa is not a narrative omission but a deliberate ethical stance, one that mirrors the archival principle of non-intrusion and aligns with decolonial calls to center absence as resistance. For Digital Humanities practitioners, this approach becomes instructive: rather than viewing fiction as merely supplementary to ethnographic data, this novel illustrates how storytelling can challenge dominant paradigms of representation, prompting us to rethink what, and who, digital archives are for. In this way, literature does not merely reflect ethical concerns; it actively shapes the methodological imagination of decolonial digital work.

One of the novel's most significant contributions lies in its use of imaginative restitution. Rather than claiming to recover lost indigenous voices, *The Last Wave* reconstructs the ecological and political context in which those voices have been suppressed or silenced. Through its depiction of state intrusion, media sensationalism, and the ethical struggles of well-meaning outsiders, the novel renders visible the forces that marginalize indigenous subjectivity without attempting to speak in its place. This kind of imaginative work is critical in DH, where the urge to preserve and display must be tempered by an awareness of what cannot, and perhaps should not be digitally rendered. Literature, in this sense, becomes a space of rehearsal and reflection, allowing researchers to explore how stories might be told ethically, even in the absence of direct testimony.

Building on this, one concrete proposal is to incorporate this novel itself into the infrastructure of digital archives as a gateway text, a bridge between fiction, journalism, and indigenous testimony. Annotated digital editions of the novel, for instance, could be developed that contextualize its representations with scholarly commentary, regional history, environmental data, and excerpts from indigenous-rights literature. Such a resource would not only enrich literary analysis but also foster cross-disciplinary dialogue, connecting humanities scholars, environmentalists, and DH practitioners in shared ethical reflection. The annotations could highlight the novel's cautionary depictions of media, its critique of state development policies, and its nuanced portrayals of non-

verbal indigenous knowledge systems. They could also invite counter-commentary or supplemental material from local communities, where appropriate, creating a layered, dialogic archive rather than a static, authoritative one. By foregrounding the representational ethics modeled in *The Last Wave*, such a digital edition would avoid the temptation to instrumentalize the text or reduce it to ethnographic data. Instead, it would preserve the ambivalence and restraint that are central to the novel's ethical power. In doing so, it would model a broader DH methodology, one that understands literature not as a source of information, but as a practice of critical and imaginative engagement, capable of guiding how we build, use, and critique digital archives in the age of postcolonial reckoning.

CONCLUSION

Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* presents a compelling reflection on the ethical boundaries and potentialities of representing indigenous communities, particularly the Jarawa, whose histories have long been shaped by exclusion from official archives, media narratives, and dominant forms of knowledge. Through its narrative restraint and refusal to appropriate Jarawa voices, the novel models an alternative form of engagement, one that centers silence, presence, and ecological wisdom without imposing external frameworks. In doing so, it offers valuable insights for Digital Humanities, urging practitioners to rethink archival practices that too often reproduce colonial patterns of representation and control. Digital Humanities, when grounded in decolonial ethics, can become powerful tools for resisting archival silence. But this requires more than digitization, it demands community participation, recognition of orality and non-textual knowledge, and a willingness to foreground absence as an intentional and ethical act. In contexts like the Jarawa, where direct collaboration may not be possible, the most ethical archive may be one that resists classification, resists completion, and instead reflects careful restraint and structural humility. The way forward lies in designing community-driven, participatory archives that value relational knowledge over universal systems, and that make space for ambiguity, refusal, and cultural specificity. Digital tools must be reshaped to serve not only access and preservation but also justice and accountability. The future of archiving must be defined not by how much can be collected, but by how deeply we are willing to listen, unlearn, and honor what cannot be contained. In this respect, *The Last Wave* is more than literature, it is a moral compass for those seeking to ethically navigate the intersection of storytelling, technology, and indigenous sovereignty.

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